



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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The State of the Union Address by the President of the United States

Bartosz Wiśniewski

President Obama used his first State of the Union Address, given on 27 January, to focus on domestic issues. The challenge of introduction of social and economic reform may affect his level of activeness in the international arena in 2010.

The administration's priority for 2010 will be domestic affairs, above all use of the economic growth noticeable in 2009 to lower unemployment (which has gone up from 7.7% to 10% since Obama came to power), which will be especially important in the face of the November mid-term Congressional elections and the states' gubernatorial elections. Obama has reduced the urgency of his most important project to date—reform of the health insurance system. This is due in no small measure to the loss by the Democratic Party of its freedom to work on this issue in the Senate, where the Republicans now have enough seats to effectively block legislative work. The plan for combating the budget deficit is to freeze some areas of federal expenditures (but not defense or international operations, such as humanitarian aid), which should bring savings of USD 250 billion over the next 10 years, but may be only the first element of a long-term strategy to reduce the deficit (estimated at USD 1.35 billion in 2010).

The demanding domestic situation has forced Obama to focus on economic issues in his address, thus preventing the president from sketching out the US' ambitious foreign policy agenda. Obama made no reference to one of the most important initiatives put forward in 2009, which was the call for forging of new relations with the Muslim world. There was also no mention in the address of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which was a US priority in 2009. With respect to Afghanistan he confirmed only the previous decisions, preferring to concentrate on the prospect of handing over responsibility for security in the country to the Afghan forces, as a condition for commencing the withdrawals of US troops from July 2011.

Obama referred more widely to his vision of global nuclear disarmament. He announced prompt finalization of US-Russian talks regarding the post-START agreement, thus suggesting that the Obama administration is sure of achieving a success in this matter. He also stressed the goal set ahead of the summit planned for April this year on nuclear security—a tightening of control over nuclear arsenals. However, he avoided the controversial topic of the US' accession to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, thereby suggesting a readiness to adhere to the objections made by some Republicans on this issue. In turn the Republicans' support will be needed to secure consent to ratification of a disarmament agreement with Russia. Obama has also decided to take a firmer stance towards Iran's nuclear ambitions. He proposed putting into place a new set of sanctions, taking stock of the failure of the Iranian authorities to respond to past offers of dialogue, and the Iranian regime's repression of the opposition following the rigged presidential elections.

The perfunctoriness of the address with respect to foreign and security policy may indicate that Obama will be less inclined to broaden his activities in the international arena, preferring to get personally involved in initiatives that could bring fast and unequivocal success. This diagnosis seems to be borne out by the announced stiffening of policy towards Iran, since introduction of sanctions enjoys a bipartisan consensus in the U.S. Congress. The relatively low, compared to that of his predecessors, public appraisal of the first year of his presidency, and the fact that the American public expects greater effectiveness of domestic policies, may lead Obama to set less ambitious foreign policy goals. This would have a negative effect on the effectiveness of international cooperation in issues such as overcoming the effects of the global economic crisis or conflict resolution.